

Interior Planning of College and University Libraries*

ONE OF THE BASIC AIMS of our society today is individual freedom: freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom to seek information and exchange ideas as we see fit. Nowhere is this aim more prevalent nor more important than in our colleges and universities, where a young adult is granted greater freedom to formulate his cultural instincts than at any previous period of his life. His academic surroundings aim to stimulate, but never compel, his educational endeavors. It is apparent that college students in America require enticement rather than compulsion to direct their instincts toward better education.

Whether this system is or is not the best is beside the point. It becomes obvious that, under such a system, the college or university library is, or should be, the key to its success. It should be the hub of any university system. It should be the foundation upon which are developed future habits of self-education. It should attract the student, serve him in the most efficient manner possible, offer a retreat for cultural activities as well as for required research and reading, and build his confidence in the security of knowledge and his instinct for culture. To him, the university library should be far more than a repository for books; it should serve as a basis for his strivings toward enlightenment.

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More specifically then, what should be the composite functions of the college and university library? What factors should be considered in a library program, particularly as pertains to the planning of the building? How important is its interior planning, the relationship of its areas, scope of its activities, versatility of spaces and colors, proportion of study and lounge areas? In addition to basic library function, what factors enter into the interior planning of a college or university library?

Faced with a building program, the librarian should first clarify the desired functions: what various purposes the building is intended to accomplish. Relative to this, he should become conscious of his "competition." Since the success of any library can be measured only in terms of traffic and circulation, such "competition" must be recognized. The most obvious, for example, is the increasingly popular student union building. Here is a building designed to attract students, a social center delegated to the exchange of ideas, a meeting place often housing the offices of the various extracurricular activities: the publications, student council, honorary fraternities, etc. The student union with its pleasant surroundings and attractive snack lounges and meeting rooms can conceivably impair the more serious ambitions of the library.

Is it not possible, with such a variance of extraneous diversions, that the college or university library as such is too limited in its scope? Could it not, perhaps, attempt to encompass a greater portion of student activity, include and absorb

other recreational activities beyond those which are purely studious in nature? With the increasingly relaxed atmosphere prevalent on our college and university campuses today, it is questionable whether the function of the college or university library is sufficient as it pursues its role as a concentrate for academic requirements—and nothing more. Obviously there are many other forms of educational activity in which the library should not only be informed, but offer facilities and aid as well. Although this question of expanding the present vista of the college and university library is unanswerable without considerable debate, the fundamental purpose of the library remains, and to whatever extent its program reaches, the answer still lies in enticement rather than compulsion and therefore in thorough interior planning, a careful correlation of function with attractiveness in atmosphere, an efficient plan concealed by relaxed and pleasant surroundings.

The initial realization that he is responsible for the coordination and conduct of a complex building program often leaves a librarian with a cold sense of inadequacy; he feels certainty in his knowledge of library operation, but his practical knowledge of architecture, creative planning, functional layout, color and selection of materials and equipment is all too hazy. He must make the decisions. He must select the professional help which will aid him in the separate phases of the program. It is his responsibility to coordinate the program and evolve from it a homogenous, workable, long-lasting library.

Obviously the first hurdle is the building itself. The librarian's initial responsibility as coordinator commences with the selection of, and his mutual cooperation with, the architect. It has been said before, and must be re-stressed, that the architect's capabilities are limited by his understanding of the nature and function of the building he is to design.

Unless the librarian takes the time to detail the various functional aspects of the university and college library, its required storage and traffic capacities, the various areas required and their interrelationships by writing a program, a workable solution is dubious and efficient interior planning may be impossible. It must be stressed that a library is a service institution, not a monument. Budgets must be discussed in detail. Such important factors as acoustics and lighting must either be clarified or the architect referred to experts in those fields—particularly those with experience in the requirements peculiar to libraries.

These aspects of preliminary planning are mentioned because they so firmly establish the potential of interior planning, with regard not only to functions but to attractiveness as well. It is always a difficult matter to determine whether proper planning begins with the interior operation or with the architect and his general plan. The most efficient approach, undoubtedly, would be a simultaneous, coordinated effort on the part of the architect and persons responsible and experienced in the interior planning and function of libraries. Thus a give-and-take operation would develop, with the architect and the interior planner approaching together a common goal which would evolve the best solution to the problem, from all aspects.

Without question many problems of the librarian could be overcome by the simple expedient of retaining an interiors consultant to work cooperatively with the architect on the over-all plan. However, it is unfortunate that there are few such consultants with specialized knowledge in the requirements peculiar to library work. Interior decorating, as such, is inadequate. Although a competent interior decorator may solve some of the problems, the critical issues which involve operational and functional coordination are apt to be superficially re-

garded because of a lack of technical background in the library field. This can be disastrous; beautiful colors and handsome furniture do not make a workable library.

Nor is it sufficient to employ or rely completely upon the services of a single manufacturer, regardless of his claims to knowledge in the making of library-standard furnishings. It is understandable that no single manufacturer can supply the total needs of a particular library. It is also understandable that no manufacturer can be expected to approach the job without considerable bias toward his own products, possibly even at the expense of the end result. No manufacturer should be condemned for attempting to create a factory showroom from any job which he controls; it is his business to promote and display his products.

Therefore, if an interiors consultant is to be considered, he should be retained first for his general knowledge of the library field, but of equal importance for his unbiased interest in the program itself.

However, in many cases it is unfeasible—for financial or other reasons—to retain a consultant for interior planning of the library. The detailed responsibility, then, falls to the librarian. There are certain basic elements of library planning which may well be kept in mind.

One basic fiat of any library building is control. This is true whether it be a public library or a university or college library. Control means more than efficient operation of book circulation, record maintenance, filing and processing, etc.—it means visual control of the various areas. Particularly in university libraries, it is important to maintain control of all areas without direct supervision—not to speak of the financial burden of maintaining breakdown supervision where it can be avoided. In a large library a certain amount of departmen-

talization will of course be required. However, even among various areas and departments it is sometimes possible to combine supervising capacities by intelligent interior planning. Visual control of book-stack aisles, music listening booths, meeting rooms and special research rooms such as the map room, is advisable. In the general plan it is often possible to keep the various areas open to one another, yet operationally separate, by careful integration of color and acoustics.

It should be stressed that the problem of control should be studied and solved, in the interior planning program, with an endeavor to maintain subtlety throughout. Any obvious aspect of militant supervision should be avoided, since one of the basic objectives of a college and university library is to help the student gain maturity through his own efforts.

In the preliminary establishment of a basic plan, the spatial needs of the library can be determined without particular regard for budget limitations. In other words, the program itself determines the needed facilities as to space and equipment; how lavishly or frugally these requirements are handled can be established later in the program. Since these basic requirements are unavoidable and must be met regardless of budget limitations, an actual outline listing equipment and furnishing needs would be desirable. Seating capacities of various areas, book storage requirements, (with proper anticipatory demands for the future) equipment needs, and other basic breakdown requirements should be summarized and enumerated. It is important that these preliminary specifications be developed without preconceived concepts of types or standards or specific manufacturers' products. Too often a librarian will enter into a building program, with understandable enthusiasm, and become prematurely influenced by the glowing circulars and glib descrip-

tions submitted by various manufacturers in the field. This can obscure the basic issue and at such a preliminary but important stage misdirect the librarian's well intended responsibility as coordinator of the program. It can be disappointing when later budget breakdowns prohibit the incorporation of the librarian's preconceived desires. Also, it is well to point out that many fine libraries have been planned and executed with beautiful as well as workable results from very limited budgets. A knowledge of the furniture and equipment markets, careful and intelligent use of color, and experienced handling of materials by both the architect and the interiors consultant can often turn a disheartening budget into a handsome, useful, and extremely workable library. It is a relatively simple matter to take a virtually unlimited budget and resolve from it an attractive library building; however, it takes ingenuity to master a limited budget and bring it to an equally successful conclusion. And the gratification from the extra creative effort involved is proportionately greater.

Once the basic equipment requirements are established, in general terms, this list must be fitted to the over-all budget, if such has already been determined. Or, if the equipment and furnishing budget has yet to be proposed, breakdown cost estimates must be determined. Again, a knowledge of the available markets is an invaluable aid, but if such professional advice is not available the librarian and others responsible must rely on their judgment resulting from investigation. Salesmen should be interviewed and literature studied; where possible, past performance and experience in the standards peculiar to library usage should be investigated. The actual allocation of dollars per item is perhaps one of the most difficult stages for a person inexperienced in the technical aspects of furniture construction as it pertains to durability,

particularly since the responsibility of the librarian does not terminate with the actual purchase and installation, but extends to the future maintenance costs and usable life span of the specified items of equipment.

If the librarian is solely responsible for the selection and purchase of furnishings, there are certain specific inquiries which are advisable to undertake. In furniture, construction, finish, and design are most important. Unless it is possible to actually purchase and test sample pieces of various items proposed, construction durability is extremely difficult to determine without a thorough knowledge of standard construction systems. Generally, a piece of furniture is only as strong as its weakest joint; but joint failures often develop one, two, or even five years later. Therefore, the safest determining factor in the question of durability is the manufacturer's reputation. A list of installations submitted by the manufacturer should be checked, both as to duration of usage and amount of abuse to which it has been submitted. As to finish, there are several finishes available which are standard, from hot and cold lacquer systems to baked varnishes and penetrating oil finishes. These can and should be tested comparatively, unless the librarian has access to unquestionably reliable data from other installations.

The third factor, design of furniture, is too often taken for granted. A library should stand for more than mere access to culture; it should, by virtue of its surroundings, present a symbol of its aesthetic leadership in the university or college and the community. Its building, furnishings, colors and atmosphere should stand as a living and current representation of our own cultural status and the vital present-day energies that have created and are creating it. Therefore the congruity of its furnishings with the building itself, from a design standpoint, is most important. Good design

both from an architectural and interior planning standpoint need not be divorced from functional efficiency. In fact, the true test of a well coordinated and intelligently designed library (or any building) can best be measured by the success of this interrelationship.

To say what is good or bad design, or good or bad taste, is of course an arbitrary question that would lead only to endless debate. However, in determining the design standards for interior furnishings, there should certainly be personnel available from various art and architectural departments who would be most eager to offer advice and criticism, should the librarian feel doubtful as to rendering a final opinion on design quality.

Little need be said about the selection of technical equipment. It is assumed that the librarian, from experience and correspondence with other library directors, can determine the most adequate operative equipment available within the budget.

The coordination of colors and materials within the building is another task which has too often been neglected. This is most important. Just as merchandising establishments take great care in organizing colors to gain a maximum psychological advantage, so should the library offer due consideration to this phase of its planning. The basic theme to be set throughout the interior should be restful and relaxing. However, this does not mean that somber colors should necessarily predominate. On the contrary, many successful libraries have indulged in bright, cheerful colors which, upon entering the building, give a person an immediate and pronounced uplift. Regardless of the weather, where large glass areas make the exterior scene a prominent consideration, reading rooms and other areas can present a warm, homey, and relaxed atmosphere. There is no reason to believe that the old concept of dull colors, hard, uncom-

fortable chairs, and a frightening, hushed air, is conducive of undistracted study.

Although almost unlimited color ranges are feasible if intelligently organized, there are certain basic limitations which must be considered. Particularly where strong colors are planned, extreme contrasts should be avoided except in areas where definite dramatic reactions are wanted. It must be remembered that, although the colors throughout the building should normally become an integral part of the building, they should in effect remain a background for the furnishings and occupants. With careful planning this can be accomplished with strong colors as well as subdued hues. The required furnishings and equipment (and their necessary placement throughout the building) are of such complex nature in a library as to present a "busy" and cluttered appearance unless carefully organized in relation to colors. The visual impression received by the myriad colors of the books is in itself a basic consideration, and further adds to a sensation of visual activity. Light contrasts should be considered, both from artificial and natural sources. For example, where small windows are involved, light acts as a contrasting agent to the colors immediately surrounding the windows. Therefore, the lighter the color on the window wall, the less the harshness of contrast. Color intensity is observed in relation to the amount of light reflection and since the principle applies that light diminishes as the square of the distance from its source, the exact intensity of a color must be considered in relation to its distance from light sources.

Since a person's sensory comprehension is established initially by subconscious reaction to color surroundings, a basic initial impression is created upon first entering the confined areas of any building. Whatever the desired impression—relaxed or riotous, subdued or

(Continued on page 238)

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Interior Planning of College and University Libraries

(Continued from page 235)

stimulating—it must be integrated with the remainder of the building, since the homogeneous function of a library dictates a constancy of atmosphere throughout. Thus, a continuity of color should be adhered to. If changes in general color combinations are made, they should be alterations of such subtlety that one is not directly conscious of the change. The building as a whole should, architecturally, be a single unified entity, and so should the colors carry out this policy of sustained uniformity. Otherwise the analogy of a library, or any building with a single functional purpose, would be lost.

A great deal more could be said about color, and additional data submitted pertaining to the accomplishment of an homogeneous interior. However, the primary importance of color within the building cannot be underestimated,

since this background definitely establishes the sensory impressions on which are founded the general reaction and ultimate success of the library.

Every building program produces its own amalgam of problems, each of which must be solved in its own way. However, the general conditions mentioned here, as they pertain to interior planning, should be met. It is hoped that they will serve as an aid in organizing and approaching the arduous task of coordinating the interiors with the remaining phases of library planning. Functional efficiency, proper handling of materials and color, careful selection of equipment and furnishings, intelligent architectural and interior planning—all of these factors interrelate within the organization and development of the building program, and each is essential to the creation of a successful library.